

CIA OPERATIONS CENTER

Approved For Release 2006/05/24 : CIA-RDP80S01268A000200020008-2

16 Nov 77

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Item No. 1
Ref. No.

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780-BARTLETT 2TAKES 11-15

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RELEASE FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17
(TRANSMITTED 11-15)

NEWS FOCUS: INTELLIGENCE FAILURE IN IRAN

BY CORD MEYER — *Cord Meyer*

WASHINGTON -- IN THIS SAVAGELY COMPETITIVE TOWN, FOREIGN
POLICY OFFICIALS HAVE OFTEN MADE THE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES THE
ESCAPEGOATS FOR THEIR OWN MISTAKES OF JUDGMENT. BUT IN THE CASE
OF IRAN, THE INTELLIGENCE WAS ERRONEOUS.

THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE HAS A HOT POTATO ON ITS
HANDS IN THE FORM OF A HIGHLY INACCURATE CIA ASSESSMENT OF THE
POSITION OF THE SHAH SUBMITTED TO THE WHITE HOUSE IN
MID-AUGUST. WHEN CONGRESS CONVENES, THE COMMITTEE WILL HAVE
TO DECIDE HOW FAR TO PUSH THE INQUIRY INTO ADM. STANSFIELD
TURNER'S PERFORMANCE AS CIA DIRECTOR AND WHAT REMEDIAL ACTION
TO RECOMMEND.

THE CIA ASSESSMENT WAS SO FAR OFF THE MARK THAT PRESIDENT
CARTER IS DEEPLY CONCERNED BY THIS FAILURE TO COMPREHEND A
SITUATION CRITICAL TO AMERICAN SECURITY. OFFICIALS WHO HAVE
SEEN THE DOCUMENT DESCRIBE IT AS "180 DEGREES WRONG" IN ITS
UNDERESTIMATION OF THE GROWING POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS
OPPOSITION AND IN ITS BLAND REASSURANCE THAT THE SHAH DID NOT
FACE EVEN A SERIOUS CRISIS, MUCH LESS THE MAJOR REVOLT THAT HAS
OCCURRED.

THE AGENCY WAS NOT ALONE IN ITS IGNORANCE OF THE FORCES
BOILING BENEATH THE SURFACE GLITTER OF IRANIAN SOCIETY. THE
U.S. AMBASSADOR, WILLIAM H. SULLIVAN, DOES NOT LIKE TO BE
REMINDING OF HIS PUBLIC ASSURANCE SIX MONTHS AGO THAT THE
SPREADING FIRES WERE NOT A CAUSE OF MAJOR CONCERN. THE STATE
DEPARTMENT SHARED WITH THE CIA AN UNINFORMED OPTIMISM AND WAS
AS ISOLATED AS THE SHAH HIMSELF FROM THE REALITIES.

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4 HOWEVER, IT IS THE CIA'S JOB ABROAD TO KNOW THE DEPTH AND MOTIVATION OF THE OPPOSITION IN COUNTRIES IMPORTANT TO U.S. SECURITY. SATELLITE PHOTOGRAPHY IS OF NO HELP IN THIS TASK SINCE POLITICAL INTENTIONS ARE HIDDEN FROM THE CAMERA'S EYE, AND HUMAN SOURCES ARE ESSENTIAL.

IF THIS KIND OF REPORTING HAD BEEN AVAILABLE, CARTER OFFICIALS FEEL THAT POLICY COULD HAVE BEEN ADJUSTED TO HEAD OFF THE CRISIS. THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN LESS PRESSURE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND MORE INSISTENCE THAT THE SHAH REACH A COMPROMISE SETTLEMENT WITH THE MODERATE OPPOSITION ELEMENTS. EVEN NOW, LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT HOW THE OPPOSITION IS ORGANIZED AND FINANCED.

THIS FAILURE TAKEN TOGETHER WITH THE LACK OF EARLY WARNING ON THE COMMUNIST COUP IN AFGHANISTAN, TRANSFORMING THAT COUNTRY INTO A SOVIET SATELLITE, HAS FOCUSED THE ADMINISTRATION'S CONCERN ON THE AGENCY'S ABILITY TO COLLECT AND ANALYZE ACCURATELY. THERE IS A SYMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE FACT THAT CONGRESSIONAL INVESTIGATIONS, EXCESSIVE PUBLICITY, AND THE INSTABILITY CAUSED BY FIVE DIRECTORS IN FIVE YEARS HAVE BADLY SHAKEN MORALE.

UNDER THE WHITE HEAT OF SO MUCH CRITICISM, THERE IS A NATURAL TENDENCY FOR OPERATORS IN THE FIELD TO PLAY IT SAFE BY AVOIDING THE RISKY RECRUITMENT OF AGENTS WHO MAY PROVE CONTROVERSIAL. THE LACK OF ANY LEGISLATION TO PROTECT THE IDENTITY OF CIA OFFICERS OVERSEAS IS AN INHIBITING FACTOR. THE RISK OF EXPOSURE OF AGENT IDENTITIES IN LEGAL TRIALS LIKE THE ITT CASE AND IN THE PUBLISHED MEMOIRS OF DISSAFFECTED EMPLOYEES IS ENOUGH TO DISCOURAGE THE COOPERATION OF FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE SERVICES. THE WILLINGNESS OF FOREIGN CITIZENS TO SUPPLY INFORMATION WHEN THEIR LIVES MAY BE AT STAKE IS MUCH REDUCED.

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RESPONDING TO THESE GENUINE CONCERNS, CARTER OFFICIALS HAVE PUT THE SENATE INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE ON NOTICE THAT THEY ARE NOT PREPARED TO ACCEPT MANY OF THE INHIBITING RESTRICTIONS AND REPORTING REQUIREMENTS THAT THE COMMITTEE HAS WRITTEN INTO ITS PROPOSED NEW LEGAL CHARTER FOR THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY. THEY FEEL THAT THE PENDULUM HAS SWUNG TOO FAR FROM INADEQUATE CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT TOWARD EXCESSIVE CONGRESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE DAY-TO-DAY MANAGEMENT OF THE AGENCY.

THE STAGE IS SET FOR A SHOWDOWN BETWEEN THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON THESE ISSUES WHEN THE NEW CONGRESS CONVENES. THE ELECTION RESULTS INDICATE THAT THE COUNTRY IS READY TO SUPPORT A FIRMER DEFENSE POSTURE BOLSTERED BY AN EFFECTIVE INTELLIGENCE SERVICE.

AFTER 19 MONTHS IN OFFICE, ADM. TURNER'S PERFORMANCE AS CIA DIRECTOR IS ALSO COMING UNDER CLOSER SCRUTINY FROM WITHIN THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION. HE MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MISLEADING IRANIAN ASSESSMENT; AND IT HAS RAISED QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS JUDGMENT AND STYLE OF MANAGEMENT. IN ADDITION TO RECENTLY PUBLISHED CRITICISM OF HIS PERSONAL INTERVENTION IN THE ESTIMATING PROCESS, DOUBTS ARE EXPRESSED ABOUT THE QUALITY OF SOME OF THE PEOPLE HE HAS BROUGHT IN FROM THE OUTSIDE AND THE DAMAGING EFFECT OF DRASTIC REORGANIZATION MOVES. THERE IS A FEELING HE SPENDS TOO MUCH TIME MAKING PUBLIC SPEECHES AROUND THE COUNTRY AND NOT ENOUGH TIME AT HIS DESK.

MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE AT THIS STAGE AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE NEEDS CONTINUITY OF COMPETENT LEADERSHIP. THE HOPE IS THAT TURNER CAN LEARN FROM THE IRANIAN DEBACLE. THERE IS NO SIGN YET THAT CARTER IS LOSING CONFIDENCE IN TURNER AS HIS PERSONAL CHOICE BUT A REPETITION OF THE IRANIAN FAILURE COULD CHANGE HIS MIND.

FNS (CREDIT BARTLETT) 11-16
RELEASE FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17

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